

Lesson 4 Theme

The **theme** is the message or the main idea that the author wants you to get from the writing. Usually, an author doesn't state the theme directly. Instead, the theme becomes apparent as the characters experience events. By paying close attention to the events and outcome, you should be able to determine the theme.



Tips for Success

- Focus on the message the author wants to get across.
- Decide which answer choice best sums up the main idea of the story.

As you read this narrative from *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, think about the theme that the author presents.

I believe I have omitted mentioning that, in my first voyage from Boston, being becalmed off Block Island, our people set about catching cod, and hauled up a great many. Hitherto I had stuck to my resolution of not eating animal food, and on this occasion I considered . . . the taking of fish as a kind of unprovoked murder, since none of them had, or ever could do us any injury that might justify the slaughter. All this seemed very reasonable. But I had formerly been a great lover of fish, and, when this came hot out of the frying-pan, it smelled admirably well. I balanced some time between principle and inclination, till I recollected that, when the fish were opened, I saw smaller fish taken out of their stomachs; then thought I, "If you eat one another, I don't see why we mayn't eat you." So I dined upon cod very heartily, and continued to eat with other people, returning only now and then occasionally to a vegetable diet.

1. What message can you infer from this story?
 - A. Most vegetarians aren't really serious about not eating meat.
 - B. When you are tempted to do something, you can often find a reason to do it.
 - C. In the world of nature, the big and the powerful prey upon the small and the weak.
 - D. When caught in a serious situation, you must sometimes compromise your values.

1. (A) (B) (C) (D)

Mark your answer choice by filling in the oval.



Now check to see whether you chose the correct answer.

- A. The passage is only about Benjamin Franklin, not about vegetarians in general.
- B. This is the correct answer. Franklin shows how easily temptation caused him to change his mind.
- C. While Franklin observes that big fish ate little fish, this is not the main idea he wishes to express.
- D. Franklin was not really in a serious situation and he was not forced to compromise.

Test Practice

As you read these poems, think about their themes.

About Crows

The old crow is getting slow.
 The young crow is not.
 Of what the young crow does not know
 The old crow knows a lot.

 At knowing things the old crow
 Is still the young crow's master.
 What does the slow old crow not know?
 How to go faster.

 The young crow flies above, below,
 And rings around the slow old crow.
 What does the fast young crow not know?
 Where to go.

—John Ciardi

XXIV

I saw a man pursuing the horizon;
 Round and round they sped.
 I was **disturbed** at this;
 I accosted the man.
 "It is futile," I said,
 "You can never—"
 "You lie," he cried,
 And ran on.

—Stephen Crane

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|----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 1. | (A) | (B) | (C) | (D) |
| 2. | (A) | (B) | (C) | (D) |
| 3. | (A) | (B) | (C) | (D) |

Mark the best answer for questions 1–2.

- What is the theme of the poem "About Crows"?
 - The natural slowing down that comes with age frustrates the young.
 - Don't expend too much energy if you don't know where you're going.
 - The wisdom of experience is more important than youthful enthusiasm.
 - The old envy the young.
- The theme of the poem by Stephen Crane might be:
 - You should never ignore helpful advice.

- There is more than one way to look at a situation.
 - Achieving our goals requires extraordinary energy.
 - You can usually help others by giving good advice.
- The meaning of **disturbed** in line 3 of the poem by Stephen Crane is
 - made worried, nervous, or upset.
 - broke up the quiet or calm of a place.
 - mixed up or put into disorder.
 - broke in on or interrupted.

- Read the Stephen Crane poem again. How would you describe its theme?
